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ABSTRACT

The basic skills program at Norwalk Community College integrates the teaching of fundamental reading, writing, and study skills with an introductory course in psychology. The pyramid diagram is one of the key techniques used in the program. It is a visual outline which organizes information so that the subject, main idea, and details connect in a logical way. It is based on research about the way the brain retains and retrieves information, which indicates a limit to the number of separate items of information that the brain can remember, which can be overcome by categorizing the information. Pyramid diagrams are introduced as follows: (1) students read a chapter summary; (2) they read aloud facts from the summary which are recorded on separate index cards; (3) the instructor reads the cards randomly to the students who check off each fact; (4) students group the cards and label the groups; (5) a pyramid diagram is constructed recording first the subject of the summary, then the main categories, then the supporting details. Finally, students agree upon a complete sentence encompassing all details represented in the diagram. Students are encouraged to use the technique in textbook reading, organizing lecture notes, preparing for examinations, and organizing essays and research papers. (AYC)

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THE PYRAMID DIAGRAM

A TOOL FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

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THE PYRAMID DIAGRAM-A TOOL FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

An innovative basic skills program has been developed at Norwalk Community College to help students with inadequate literacy skills become efficient and successful learners. The program is unique in that it integrates the teaching of fundamental reading, writing, and study skills with an introductory course in psychology. All students enrolled in the combined reading and writing skills course must also enroll in the introductory course in psychology.

This integrated program teaches students to cope with the text, class lectures, and tests of a college level course. It eliminates the basic weakness of most study skills programs--the lack of transfer from skills course to subject area course.

The pyramid diagram is one of the key techniques used in the program. It aids students in textbook reading, organizing lecture notes, preparing for examinations, and organizing essay and research papers. A pyramid diagram is a visual outline which organizes information so that the subject, main idea, and details connect in a logical way. It is based on research about the way the brain retains and retrieves information.

According to studies by learning theorist George Miller, there is a limit to the number of separate items of information that the human brain can receive, process and remember. The human primary, or short-term, memory seems to be limited to no more than seven items. However, psychological experiments indicate that the seven item limitation can be overcome by grouping or categorizing, so that each piece of information becomes rich in detail and meaning. In addition, each category must be organized into a logical structure for effective learning to take place. Studies show that in order for information to be retrieved, it must be stored in the long-term memory. Unless structured the material will not transfer from short-term to long-term memory.

The pyramid diagram techniqe provides a structured overview of the information to be learned and a visual representation of how each item relates to every other item. Pyramid diagrams are introduced to students in the following way:

1. Students read a chapter summary from their psychology text. (Figure A)
2. Students read aloud facts from the summary.
3. The instructor writes each fact on a separate index card.
4. The instructor displays the cards on a desk, and then reads them, in random order, to the students.
5. Students skim the passage for each fact, as it is read, and then check it off.
6. Students gather around the desk and place the cards into piles. They are asked to name, or label each pile, and to put an index card with the name of each group on top of the appropriate pile.
7. A pyramid diagram is then written on the blackboard. The diagram is based on the group of cards on the desk. (Figure B)
8. The subject of the pyramid is identified by asking the question, What's the whole thing about? The subject is written at the top of the diagram.
9. The main categories, the names of each pile of cards, are then added to the diagram. Next come the key words that stand for each supporting detail.
10. As the final step, students agree upon a complete sentence in statement form which encompasses all of the details represented in the diagram. This statement is called the main idea. It's derived by asking the question: "What's the author saying about the subject?"

After this initial experience of building a pyramid diagram students need only visualize the details of material to be learned as organized into piles or categories. They can then construct the diagram without using the index cards.

The pyramid diagram is a versatile technique. It addition to its use in structuring a textbook summary, it also helps organize classroom lecture notes.

Pyschology instructors tape some of their lectures for playback in the basic skills class. As the tape is played, students are asked to write on a sheet of paper as much of the lecture as possible. Students draw a vertical line about three inches from the left edge of their sheet. Raw notes are recorded to the right of the line. After the lecture, students read their notes back to get an overview of the lecture. The subject is identified and noted at the top of the page. Important terms are underlined or starred.

The left side of the page is for reorganized notes. Here key words and phrases are pulled out of the raw notes, categorized, labeled, and numbered. A pyramid diagram is written on a second sheet of paper based on these reorganized notes.

A writing exercise has evolved from lecture-note pyramid diagrams which is called the "frozen orange juice technique." After a lecture has been transformed into a pyramid diagram, students write the material in essay form. The information in the pyramid takes the form of complete sentences once again, only this time in the student's own words.

Another use for the pyramid diagram is in studying for examinations. To prepare for essay examinations, for example, students are asked to anticipate five questions that their instructor might ask. They then construct a pyramid diagram for the answers to each question. In preparing for objective-type examinations, students write a pyramid showing the subject, main idea, and details of all the material to be covered on the examination. The diagram thus gives a "big picture" of the material to be mastered and shows where each detail fits into the picture. It also indicates how the details are related to each other and to the main idea of the material.

The pyramid diagram is also effectively used in organizing an essay or research paper. Students learn to plan their papers by focusing on the subject.

Before they attempt to express the main idea, students learn to break down their subject into categories and then subdivide each of the categories into significant details. These details might define, explain, or give examples of the category. Writing the main idea is the final step in constructing the diagram. The main idea must be a complete sentence in the form of a statement and it should cover all of the categories in the diagram.

The three necessary parts of the essay or the research paper thus emerge from the pyramid design. The main idea becomes the thesis statement which forms the core of the introduction. The categories will summarize the main points in the body and relate them back to the thesis.

The pyramid design has proven to be a versatile and effective technique. It is versatile because it can be used in so many areas of reading and study skill development, and it is effective because it is based on scientific evidence about how the human brain processes, stores, and retrieves information.

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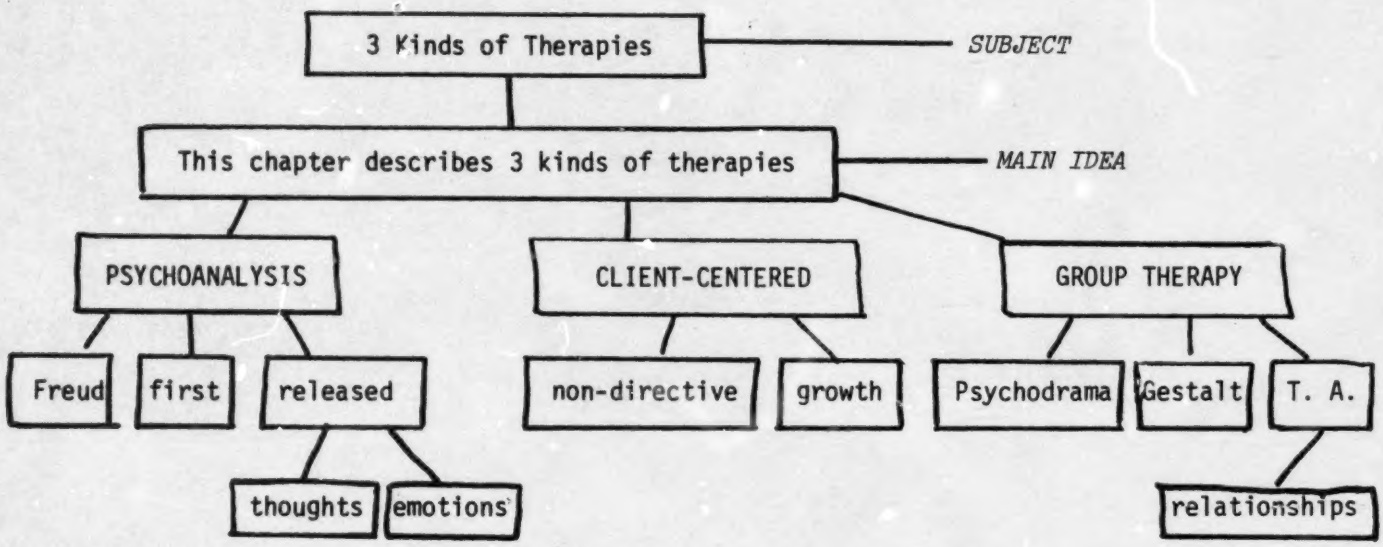
Figure A

SUMMARY OF PSYCHOLOGY TEXTBOOK CHAPTER

Freud's pyschoanalysis was the first formal therapy. Psychoanalysis seeks to release repressed thoughts and emotions from the unconscious. Client-centered therapy is nondirective and is dedicated to the creation of an atmosphere of growth. Two popular versions of group therapy are Psychodrama and Gestalt therapy. Transactional analysis is a special form of group therapy. It is distinguished by its attempts to cure relationships as well as to cure the individual.

Figure B

PYRAMID DIAGRAM



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